DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 311 479 CS 506 706

AUTHOR Toth, Elizabeth Lance
TITLE Whose Freedom and Equity in Public Relations? The Gender Balance Argument.
PUB DATE Aug 89
NOTE 20p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (72nd, Washington, DC, August 10-13, 1989).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (120) -- Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Equal Opportunities (Jobs); *Models; *Public Relations; Research Problems; Sex Bias; Sex Differences; Sex Discrimination; *Sex Role
IDENTIFIERS *Feminist Criticism; Professional Concerns

ABSTRACT

Unequal treatment, unequal value and unequal power are three aspects of the gender balance argument in public relations. The few models describing how public relations is practiced do not distinguish the component parts on the basis of gender. Such models do not consider the men and women in the intra-institutional processes as processors of public relations; nor do they take into account the men and women who attempt to impact intra-institutional decisions about the public relations process. Women and men are also processors of public relations in an inter-institutional context, within the political, legal, economic, and educational contexts of a culture. Both men and women make up publics for the intended effects of public relations activity. How gender is determined in the process of public relations should be considered in efforts to make models of the process more descriptive than current models claim to be. With more attention to how ideology and research function for what is still typically a masculine-dominated world view, the assumptions of the call for gender balance in public relations can better be understood. Understanding of the public relations role in organizations may also be enriched. (Two figures are included, and 40 references are attached.) (MG)

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WHOSE FREEDOM AND EQUITY IN PUBLIC RELATIONS? --

THE GENDER BALANCE ARGUMENT

Elizabeth Lance Toth
Assistant Professor
Southern Methodist University
Dallas, TX 75275
(214) 553-8614 (h) or 692-3607 (o)

Paper to be presented at the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication 1989 national convention, Washington, D. C.

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ABSTRACT

The author examines the gender balance argument in public relations from a feminist theoretical perspective. Feminist theory and the ideologies of feminist theory are described. Three subjects are addressed: unequal treatment; unequal value; and unequal power. The author proposes freeing the current models of public relations by examining the gender implications of the model components.

WHOSE FREEDOM AND EQUITY IN PUBLIC RELATIONS?-- THE GENDER BALANCE ARGUMENT

Researchers and experts in public relations have addressed the impact of the increasing percentage of women entering the field (Bates, 1983; Joseph, 1985; Broom and Dozier, 1986; Cline, et. al., 1986; Beasley and Theus, 1988; Reskin, 1988; and, Mathews, 1989 among others). For example, Philip Lesly has written that the impact of a "largely feminine public relations field" will have such consequences as creating the image of public relations as "soft" rather than "heavy-hitting top" management function; lowered professional aspirations because women want functional (meaning technical) rather than policy-making roles; and, lowered income levels because fields that become "female" experience such a loss (Lesly, 1988). If these consequences occur, concluded Lesly, "even fewer men will be attracted into public relations" (Lesly, 1988, p. 6).

Lesly follows others who have proposed to avoid the "consequences" of public relations becoming feminized by recruiting more males into public relations careers (Hunt and Thompson, 1987; and, McGoon, 1989). His conclusion suggests that it is the preponderance of males in an occupation that create for that occupation higher salaries, important roles, and successful status. This reasoning is not without foundation. Reskin (1988) reported that "preliminary data indicate that wage levels in male occupations that became female in the 1970s are moving closer to the levels in traditionally female occupations" (p. 262). The 1986 and 1988 pr reporter annual salary surveys of the public relations profession conclude that the restructuring of the public relations work force toward female personnel accounted for "depressed" and "stagnant" median salaries (Twenty-Second Annual Survey. . .; 24th Annual Survey).

Broom and Dozier (1986) concluded that role in public relations predicted income and women play the communication technician role -- generally a role paid less than the managerial role -- with greater frequency than do men (p. 54).

McGoon (1988) editorialized that "the more serious question to me, is how can we attract more men to the profession to establish a better gender balance (p. 4)?" His point may be interpreted in several ways. He may believe that males in public relations will suffer less if there is a gender balance or that the gender balance is what will benefit most the field of public relations. Another viewpoint concerns the equity of females working in public relations and their freedom to move into an occupation now open to them -- in order to advance in status and salary from the status and salary levels available in female-segregated occupations.

The purpose of this paper is to examine critically the assumptions behind the argument for a gender-balanced public relations field. By acknowledging such assumptions, we may increase our understanding of the public relations practice -- a practice seemingly unyielding to theory (Pavlik and Salmon, 1984; Grunig and Grunig, 1986) -- and Grunig and Grunig's (1988) problematic conclusion that data to this point suggest that "public relations is a random event" (p. 1).

Theoretical Background

This paper is based on the assumption that in society women face a continual devaluation in relation to men. This assumption perhaps seems radical to scholars of public relations practice. It is a feminist perspective only recently introduced into public relations literature (L. Grunig, 1988; Toth, 1988). L. Grunig proposed a research agenda for women in public relations that includes "acquainting researchers in public relations with the works of eminent feminist scholars across the disciplines and exploring the question of whether the study and practice of public relations can be characterized as 'masculine'" (1988 p. 49). Toth (1988) proposed to re-examine the data from the Velvet Ghetto study (Cline, et. al., 1986) and other gender-related research in

public relations from a feminist theoretical perspective -- to confront and evaluate such information and its underlying assumptions.

To characterize women as faced with a continual devaluation in relation to men means to define gender not as a biological characteristic, but as a means of characterization used in a social context. Gender is defined by Powell (1988) "as a scheme for categorization of individuals that uses biological differences as a basis for assigning social differences (p.44). Rakow proposed that "gender, (involving both our physical and mental selves) is an on-going accomplishment "(1988, p. 80). Gender then becomes for feminist researchers a dependent rather than an independent variable.

Feminist theory already has brought new dimensions to the study of communication (See for instance the special Journal of Communication Inquiry Vol. 11, No. 1 issue; Foss and Foss, 1983; Treichler and Wartella, 1986; Rohlfing, 1988; Rakow, 1986, 1987, 1988). For example, Smith (1982), in her retrospective review essay, provided a model to describe the mass media process that distinguishes, in the intra-institutional process, women as processors of mass media, women as seekers of access to the mass media process and women as influencing and as influenced by the content of mass media messages (see Figure 1). Smith placed women also as processors in an inter-institutional context, that is, in political, legal, economic, and educational contexts. She proposed finally to examine the affects of mass media messages on women. Smith concluded that using such a proposed model makes clear that "there are remedies women generally might pursue, as well as further research" on the mass media process (1982, p.158).

(Figure 1 about here)

The remedies depend on the choice of feminist ideology, described by Steeves (1987) as including liberal, socialist, and Marxist feminist theoretical frameworks. Steeves argued that "liberal feminism, which characterizes much U.S. mainstream

media research, speaks only to white, heterosexual, middle and upper class women and is incapable of addressing most women's concerns (p. 95). Liberal feminism, according to Steeves, works from the ideal that equal opportunity is possible within existing systems and that traditional social science research methods treat every unit as equal (p. 101). Examples of public relations research on women that illustrate the liberal feminist ideology are in the work of Dozier (1987) ,who proposes that women gain access to management decision making differently than men, and Wright (1983), who compared men, women, and social responsibility.

Marxist and socialist feminism, according to Steeves (1987), are similar in their belief that class oppression under capitalism is a fundamental factor in women's devaluation (p. 120). Socialist feminists believe that patriarchy is also an explanatory factor.

> Marxist feminism assumes all of society, beginning with the capitalist mode of production, must change before women's situation can change in mass media or elsewhere. Social feminism further emphasizes the value of exposing and changing interrelated ideologies of oppression and domination on the basis of gender, class, and race in ideological institutions (Steeves, 1987, p. 122).

Both radical and socialist feminists promote the use of critical, phenomenological, and qualitative methodologies (p. 108-9).

There are no specific examples of public relations research that reflect the socialist or Marxist ideology, except for perhaps L. Grunig's (1988) proposal to challenge the social status quo in academia -- even though "to subvert is a lot of work," (p. 56), Henry's (1988) historical account of Doris Fleischman Bernay's work, and Ferguson's (1987) conclusion that we should seek to understand why we value some role outcomes and not others (p. 25).

Smith's (1982) call for further research has meant for feminist theorists the recognition that research is not objective or gender-less. Gregg (1987) stated that a criterion of feminist research is "the recognition of subjects as agents of knowledge; acknowledgement of the context of the research and the conditions of its production; articulation of the value orientation of the researcher, research questions and subjects; relating knowledge to practice, not to truth" (p. 14), and "how available are you to make your knowledge to others as tools of their own liberation"(p. 8).

Dervin (1987) concluded that because of the work of feminist scholars, there are new questions to be asked -- all focused on "the fundamental concern of giving women voice so we may hear their reality" (p. 112):

> women's position in the patriarchal culture as produced and encoded in symbolic material; women's silence and how it was held in place and modified by other conditions; women's creativity as communicators in spite of that silence; women's roles as consumers, producers and reproducers, with gender and sexuality seen as constructed and sustained by symbolic orderings; and the struggle over meaning between the sexes (p. 112).

Following Dervin's lead, perhaps feminist theory can bring new insights into public relations research -- to answer such long-standing questions as:

1. Why has public relations failed to achieve the 1980's mandate to become management-oriented?
2. Why is the field fragmented by so many splinter specialities?
3. Who controls public relations products?
4. Whose interests are served?
5. What are the conditions of power and subordination within which public relations products are created and have meaning?

And finally, how can we best describe theoretically the practice of public relations?

Gender Balance Arguments

Unequal Recruitment?

The call for gender balance in public relations has been associated with the call for actively attracting males into the field. For example, Hunt and Thompson proposed to "actively recruit" male undergraduates to the study of public relations (1987). However, there is little evidence that those recruiting for public relations positions are doing anything now but encouraging men to enter public relations. According to Reskin (1988), men have full choice about what occupations to choose to enter -- and will likely choose those occupations with higher status and salary levels.

Women do not have a full range of occupations open to them. There are several findings that support this conclusion. First, in addition to personal preferences, women seem to self-select into the least desirable college majors for achieving positions with high status and salary (Knott, 1986). There are situational factors that affect women's decisions when and whether to work, especially marriage and family choices. Hiring decisions have maintained an existing pattern of sex segregation in the workplace (Heilman, 1983). When entry into a particular occupation becomes possible for women, they overcrowd the field (Reskin, 1988, p. 263).

Rather than writers such as Hunt and Thompson (1987) suggesting that men are unaware of the possibilities of a career in public relations, writers should warn women that their prospects of achieving high salaries and status are reduced by choosing female-dominated occupations (See Fisher, 1988). However, this reasoning rests on the liberal feminist ideological assumption that women as individuals can accomplish anything they set out to accomplish.

Unequal Value

There is about the gender balance argument an assumption of "balance," between the masculine and the feminine perspectives and their contributions to public

relations. However, this balance is not equal. Lesly's argument is that men strengthen salary, status, and role, while women do not -- a devaluation of women's contributions to public relations.

Perhaps, one of the strongest lines of research in public relations concerns the roles of public relations practitioners. Several researchers confirm at minimum two roles -- the managerial and the technical. Women are more likely to enter and remain in the technical role -- a role with less status and less salary. However, Broom and Dozier (1986) concluded that the "technicians" who remained in their technical roles reported greater levels of satisfaction than did those who moved on into management roles. The technician role may be of value to those who perform it, perhaps in a way that more clearly describes the public relations practice. Further study of women occupying the technical role could uncover a very different perspective of public relations than the prevailing view of a "soft" profession; that is, one that women can enter at the technical level with few formal requirements and that women can enter again after their children have grown (See Cline, et. al., 1986).

Perhaps, public relations is more correctly a technical, or as Lesly (1988), argues, a functional occupation. Because the masculine value is to ascribe managerial status to a role, we may be searching for proof of influence on the managerial function of an organization when the technical role may be the operative one. We need to review the research on managerial role reports to determine whether these people are actually performing public relations tasks. Where they may have once done so as technicians, perhaps now they are more correctly labeled "general" managers who are concerned with overall, rather than specific communication objectives for the organization. For instance, organizations hire lawyers to manage the public affairs function of the organization because public affairs requires a knowledge of how laws are created. Those in financial relations are asked to manage and understand SEC

regulations, to work with financial analysts and investors who are persuaded first by the "figures" and then by messages.

Perhaps the research methods used to describe the roles played by public relations practitioners have yet to accurately portray what is managerial and what is functional or technical activity. Rakow (1986) suggested that role "flattens and homogenizes the meaning and evaluation of experience "(p. 13). Role research generally describes what individuals report about their daily routines. It does not consider such contexts as the political, legal, economic, and educational areas that also are indicative of organizational life. From an feminine ideological perspective, women may fulfill an influential communication function for an organization -- the creation and distribution of messages.

Unequal Power

Because males in public relations do command generally greater salary, role, and status than women, is the call for gender balance an argument for the maintenance of the status quo? Many of the most powerful myths of the public relations field concern such masculine attributes as "managing" and "negotiating" (See Cline, et. al.) However, in the corporate downsizing and mergers experienced in the last five years, it is precisely these roles that have been eliminated (See McGoon, 1989). It is the technical roles, perhaps contracted out to public relations firms, than have remained. Are men attempting to maintain their perceptions of the power of public relations instead of seeking to learn as the contexts change, that their roles can change as well? Are male public relations practitioners seeking to maintain their personal positions of power? Based on initial reports of the IABC In Search of Excellence study, it is only the "excellent public relations departments" that "have women in management roles and have mechanisms to help women gain the power they need to advance from the technician to the management role" (Grunig and Grunig, 1988). This initial finding

suggests that we should examine the power relationships between those processors of public relations in institutions and also determine what these processors mean by the term "power."

Freeing the Models

The few models describing how public relations is practiced do not distinguish the component parts on the basis of gender. The Grunig and Hunt model (1984, p. 10) describes the public relations function in an organization as related by communication to the management subsystem and to the publics of the organization. The form of communication between the public relations department and an organization's publics are founded on two presuppositions: that public relations involves the use of communication to persuade or manipulate publics (the asymmetrical view); or, that public relations involves the use of communication to interact to manage conflict for the benefit of all (the symmetrical view) (See Grunig and Hunt, 1984; Grunig and Grunig, 1988, p. 13). The Crable-Vibbert model (1986) emphasizes the intra-institutional public relations functions as they interact with the organization's hierarchy and its publics. Three public relations tasks are task identification, task analysis, and task performance (p. 37). The prevailing view of most public relations models is that public relations is systemic, "the central subsystem," according to Baskin and Aronoff (1988), "through which management responds to and attempts to influence an organization's environment"(p. 19).

Such models do not now consider the men and women in the intra-institutional processes as processors of public relations; or, of the men and women who attempt to impact intra-institutional decisions about the public relations process, as Smith (1982) proposed in her model of mass media. Women and men are also processors of public relations in an inter-institutional context, that is, within in the political, legal, economic, and educational contexts of a culture. Finally, both men and women make up publics for the intended effects of public relations activity. How gender is

determined in or determines the process of public relations should be considered in our efforts to make our models of the public relations process more descriptive than current models can claim to be. Freeing the models to consider gender issues also may provide remedies to the issues facing women practitioners of public relations and to the issues facing the public relations field as a whole.

Summary and Directions

The feminist perspective proposes that women face a continual devaluation in relation to men; that to understand such processes as communication and public relations we must distinguish women as processors -- in both intra-institutional and inter-institutional contexts and as members of publics. As an approach to examining gender and the public relations process, we could adapt Smith's mass media model to our development of theories of public relations. While her model has as its paradigm the communication channels of the mass media, we would substitute the relationships that organizations seek to establish with their various publics. One other adaptation would be to consider publics rather than audiences as the receivers of public relations messages. (See Figure 2).

(Figure 2 about here).

What the Smith model does is make the point that there are processors, for instance, acting to carry out the public relations process through the creation of messages. Existing research in public relations has detailed substantially that those processors carry out two distinguishable roles -- those of technician or manager. Existing research (see Figure 2) has identified also that women are more likely to be and remain technicians. What the research on roles has not examined is whether women are more likely to be assigned or be hired to fill those technical roles because these roles are considered "women's work" or whether women technicians bring to the technical roles different values and understanding of what is mean by "technical."

the technical roles different values and understanding of what is mean by "technical."

Beyond this, we should consider whether what is defined as "managerial" is in fact "public relations activity" as defined by our theoretical definitions of public relations. A hypothesis is that males may wish to define public relations as "managerial" because it is more "masculine" in society to be thought of as managerial. To attempt to distinguish such understandings about role and status, feminist scholar propose using more qualitative research methods -- those methods, such as case histories, in-depth interviews, and participant observation that are advantageous when the subjects may need assurance that their beliefs are of value.

One further example of how the Smith model could enrich our understanding of public relations and gender is to begin examining publics in ways that consider gender a dependent variable. That is, public relations practitioners commonly use such demographic indicators as gender to give them information on how to best create messages that will have the desired impact. From a feminist theoretical perspective, this reasoning is faulty because these practitioners are attempting to predict the behavior of publics on the basis of how society ascribes characteristics to each gender (see Figure 2). Grunig (1983) began the process of more accurately depicting the behavior of publics by relying not on demographic characteristics, but on the situational issue and three independent variables: problem recognition, constraint recognition; and level of involvement. These independent variables determine three dependent variables: active information seeking, passive information processing,and the presence of a referent criterion. Grunig's situational theory of publics is "that high problem recognition, high perceived involvement and low constraint recognition increase both active information seeking and passive information processing (p. 604). The situational theory is used to explain also four possible communication effects: retention of messages, holding of cognitions, holding of attitudes; and holding of

behaviors. To this theory, I propose to add gender. A hypothesis would be that such independent variables as problem recognition, constraint recognition and levels of involvement will be different for women than for men. That is, women's problems, constraints and levels of involvement are gendered; and thus, will have different affects on information seeking and processing as well as the retention of messages, holding of cognitions; holding of attitudes; and holding of behaviors.

We must be clear regarding the ideology of feminist theoretical perspectives and recognize that research methods are not objective. This means examining why and on what basis researchers and experts in public relations research make the conclusions that they do. What ideology is operating? How does this ideology support the status quo, the prevailing views of the majority practicing public relations as opposed to depicting accurately how public relations is practiced. With such considerations as how ideology and research function for typically a masculine-dominated world view, we can better understand the assumptions of the call for gender-balance in public relations -- and most importantly, we may understand the public relations role in organizations with more validity.

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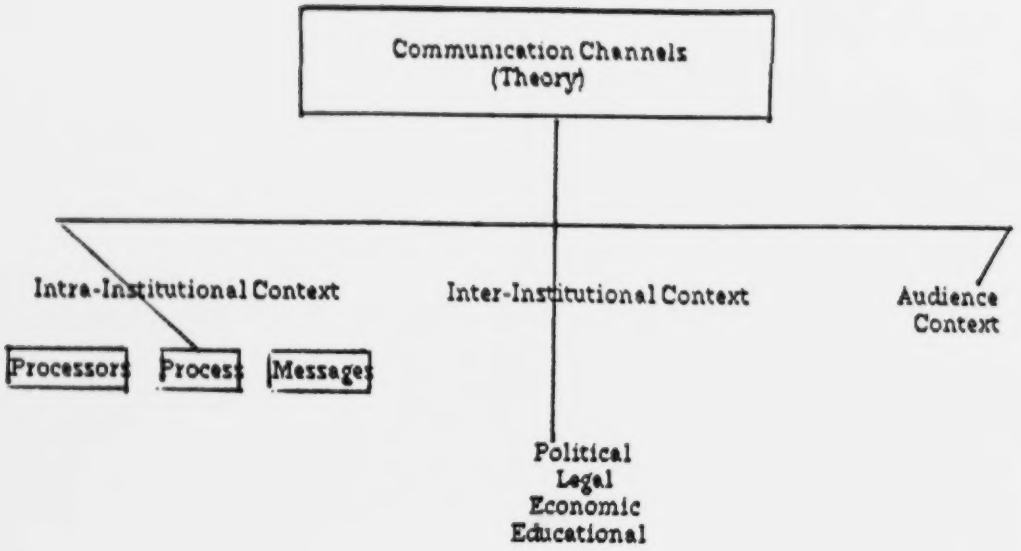

Figure 1: Smith's Research Model -- Women and the Media

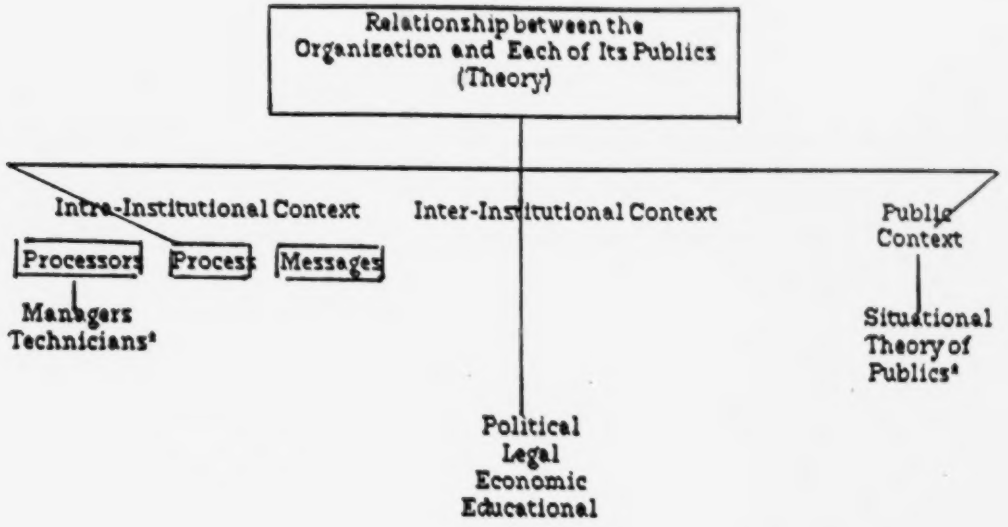

Figure 2: Adaptation of Smith's Research Modal to Women and the Public Relations Process
*Areas of Current Research